

## 17. STATUS OF THE GHARIAL (*GAVIALIS GANGETICUS*) (GMELIN) IN BHUTAN

The distribution of the gharial is given by Malcolm Smith (1931) as, "The Indus, Ganges, Mahanadi and Brahmaputra Rivers and their tributaries, and the Kaladan River, Arakan."

The gharial formerly occurred in the Manas River, a tributary of the Brahmaputra which rises in the hill country in the himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan and passes through southern (lowland) Bhutan before entering Assam. In 1978 I carried out crocodile field work in Bhutan including Manas Sanctuary (Bustard 1979) and confirmed the presence of ideal gharial habitat on the Bhutan portion of the Manas river from the border with India until the Manas enters the hill country. This area of the Manas river appeared similar to the so-called Satkosia Gorge of river Mahanadi in Orissa which is one of the sanctuaries declared for the gharial under the Government of India Crocodile Project. Satkosia Gorge has long been famous as gharial habitat. The Manas river within Bhutan includes good basing/nesting sandbanks further enhancing its habitat potential.

No gharial appear to occur today in this

stretch of the Manas River in Bhutan nor in the stretch within India adjacent to Bhutan. The last definite records of gharial were of an adult of 5.5 m which was frequently seen between 1962 and 1964 about 8 km upstream from the Bhutanese Manas Tourist Lodge, and another individual of about 4.5 m which was seen daily for about 17 years until construction of the Tourist Lodge at the site where the Tourist Lodge now stands.

In November 1977 Forest Department personnel of Project Tiger brought a gharial, reported to be about 1.5 m in length, and liberated it in the Manas river on the Bhutanese side of the Indo-Bhutanese border. This gharial was seen for 7 months until the commencement of the 1978 monsoon. However, I was advised by Shri Deb Roy, I.F.S., Field Director, Project Tiger, Manas, during December 1979 that this gharial is still being seen occasionally.

As recorded in my 1979 FAO report, efforts should be made to re-establish the gharial in Bhutan in this good habitat in Manas, especially in view of the extensive protection now afforded to Manas Sanctuary.

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